Report No. 10.—The Furniture Trade.

During the last few years some progress has been made in the manufacture of high-class furniture, but the output of the local factories still consists mainly of the cheaper kinds, while the greater portion of the goods imported is superior in quality—not only of material, but also of workmanship. Fashion in furniture, especially of the better kinds, is subject to rapid change, and the desire to possess the latest designs, combined with great facility of transport, induces the affluent to seek what they require from European art centres instead of from the local manufacturers. Nevertheless, importations show a tendency to decrease, and there is reason to believe that the influences in favour of the local production of superior furniture will ultimately prevail.

The Chinese question is dealt with at length in the appendix attached to this report; but here it may be noted that the intrusion of the Chinese into the cabinetmaking business has, without doubt, had an injurious effect upon the Australian worker, not so much by reason of the output of the Chinese factories, as from the prejudice raised in the minds of all classes against all locally made goods. Chinese competition was, in reality, directed, not against the local maker, but against the importer of cheap furniture from the East end of London, and so successfully that this class of goods has now almost ceased to be imported. Since the passing of the Chinese Restriction Act, however, their work and wages each year approach more nearly those of Australians, and their competition is, therefore, rapidly becoming less acute.

The principal articles of household furniture are produced by three broadly distinguished classes of workers, viz., woodworkers, cane and wicker workers, and upholsterers. The woodworkers are subdivided into a number of distinct trades, chief among them being cabinetmakers, carvers, chairmakers, and turners. Connected with these, but hardly to be called woodworkers, are several other trades, of which the most important are the polishers, gilders, and Venetian blind makers. Among upholsterers, also, there are many sub-classes, such as mattress and palliasse makers, and makers of mosquito-nets, window-blinds, curtains, carpets, loose covers, and so on.

Owing to the numerous ramifications of the industry it is impossible, at present, to give an estimate of its numerical strength for the whole Colony, but in the metropolitan district alone it affords employment to probably not fewer than 1,500 hands, males and females, the latter being engaged for the most part in the various branches of upholstery where needlework is required.

Condition of the Industry.

Of recent years the cheap furniture business has drifted, to a great extent, into the hands of auctioneers and furniture brokers. The regular weekly sales of cheap Chinese-made goods with occasional speculative shipments from England, America, and elsewhere, have done much to interfere with the ordinary trades, as such lines are nearly always subject to forced sales without reserve, and local makers justly complain that the practice has a tendency to reduce first the price and then the quality of all classes of furniture. But too great emphasis has, nevertheless, been laid on the injuries inflicted upon the trade by these importations, for to this cause the workers ascribe their intermittent employment and limited earnings, while the employers assign to it the existing depression, and almost every other misfortune that has befallen the industry. As an instance of their proneness to exaggerate in this direction may be taken the complaints frequently heard in the course of this inquiry, that during the last five or six years the large importations of various kinds of furniture from Italy had injuriously affected the local industry, whereas the fact is that altogether only £262 worth came in from Italy during the years 1886–91 inclusive.

Division of Labour.

The tendency to subdivide labour has of late extended its influence in every direction, and shows itself in this industry in the number of specialists, who make only one part of a piece of furniture, or confine themselves to a single operation in the upholstering or polishing branches. The old-time worker, who could make any article of furniture throughout, is now seldom found. Under the old system it was necessary for a workman to serve a long apprenticeship before he could claim to be fully qualified; but such necessity does not now exist, and the practice of apprenticeship is consequently fast falling into desuetude.

Accommodation.

The workrooms are usually roomy and well lighted, but in most cases very little attention is paid to the necessity of providing proper sanitary conveniences; and even where such have been supplied they are not kept clean and fit for use. This seems a weak spot in all factories; yet very few complaints are made, workers having apparently become reconciled to the idea that order and cleanliness are not to be looked for in such places.

Most workrooms are situated in buildings originally designed for some other purpose, and communication between the floors is usually by means of wooden ladders or stairs. Little or no work is done in these places at night, and the risk of fire in the daytime is small; but should a fire occur, the means of exit would be almost immediately closed to those at work on the upper flats, and loss of life would be inevitable.

Cabinet-making.

Cabinet-makers are the largest and most important class of furniture operatives, and it is estimated that about 230 Europeans and Chinese are at present engaged in the trade.

Complete information as to the wages, earnings, and hours of labour were obtained in regard to the great majority of these men; and nearly all the shops in the metropolitan district as well as some in the country were visited, so that it is hardly probable that any material circumstance affecting the trade has escaped attention. The recognised working time is forty-eight hours per week, and in all but four of the establishments inspected this time was observed; the time in the exceptional shops was two or three hours longer, but the number of men affected was probably not more than eight or ten.

Apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship.

Much prejudice exists in the minds of parents against putting their sons to cabinet-making, on account of the hold which the Chinese have acquired in the trade. It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of apprentices is very small, the ranks of the trade being recruited from fresh arrivals in the Colony. And in this connection it may be worthy of mention that only four out of every ten members of the Furniture Trade Society are native born.

It is very seldom that apprentices are bound by indenture. Usually the beginner enters the workshop as a "generally useful boy"; in the course of a few months he picks up a little knowledge of the business by observation, and then leaves and enters some other establishment as an improver. In this way he wanders from shop to shop, gradually improving his wages and knowledge, but seldom becoming a really efficient tradesman. Only ten apprentices were met with in the shops inspected, and these were receiving from 5s. to 15s. per week, the average being 10s. 3d. Where indentures are signed, the term of service is usually five years. Improvers are of necessity as rare as apprentices, and only three persons so styling themselves have been seen. They are receiving 12s. 6d., 15s., and 25s. respectively.

Instruction in cabinet-making may be obtained at the Technical College; but at present only nine persons are availing themselves of this course, and probably at least three of these are amateurs. Two nights in every week instruction is given by competent teachers. Tools and their application, glue and its uses, methods of joining, dovetailing, mortising, and tenoning, cabinet woods and their uses, buhl work, &c., all receive attention during a one-year course.

Earnings.

Amongst cabinet-makers there are the usual two classes, piece and time workers, and as might naturally be expected there is but small difference in the earnings of each class, such difference as there is being in favour of the piece-hands. Taking the trade generally the greater number of hands work on wages; perhaps the proportion in a hundred would be 63 wage hands and 37 piece-hands. The average earnings of each class were as follows:—

	Average weekly earnings.	Rate per hour.
On wages	51s. 3d.	1s. 1d.
Paid by results	56s. 1d.	1s. 2d.
Mean	53s. 0d.	1s. 1¼d.

These are the rates obtained by operatives when in work, but the average worker is out of employment for from two to three months in the year, so that the annual earnings may be set down at £106 to £116. Of course numbers of men do not manage to obtain even nine months constant employment, but on the other hand many are never idle, and the general opinion among operatives is that skilled men need rarely lack employment. From the nature of the trade it might be anticipated that no particular season of the year would be called busy; nevertheless there is usually a press of work during the months of December, January, and February, when every available hand finds employment. Very little work of any kind is done by cabinet-makers at their own homes, so that there is not the inducement to cut rates by working long hours which is a growing evil in some of the other trades.

Cabinet-makers usually provide their own appliances with the exception of the bench; the value of a first-class kit is estimated at about £30, but £10 will buy sufficient tools for most purposes.

AUSTRALIAN WOODS.

Some Australian forest timbers are light, soft, rich in colour, beautifully grained and marked, highly fragrant, and easily worked. These woods are eminently suitable for the finest descriptions of cabinet-making and buhl work, but unfortunately, with the exception of red cedar, they are not abundant in districts accessible by water, and their use is consequently restricted by the expense and difficulty of carriage by land. The denudation of the forests of red cedar has proceeded so rapidly that the wood is already becoming scarce, and a substitute of some kind must soon be sought. This may have the effect of bringing into use some other of the native woods, of which there is a large variety. Several hundred specimens of different species of Australian timber are exhibited in the Geological Museum attached to the Department of Mines. The principal timbers suitable for cabinet work are as follows:—

Red Cedar.—Beautiful in grain and colour, durable, and easily worked.
Blackbean.—In colour and quantity resembling walnut; abundant.
Forest Oak.—Rich Red, well marked, but hard to work and heavy.
Pigeon Ash.—Long fibre, white and clear, a good substitute for oak.
Onionwood.—Resembles cedar, but is less fragrant and beautiful.
Beech.—Handsome, durable, easily worked, and plentiful.
Rosewood.—Rich red, fragrant, beautiful, durable, abundant.
Satinwood.—Clear golden colour, durable, small and scarce.
Silky Oak.—Beautifully marked, pale golden colour, small and scarce.
Tulip.—Beautifully marked, hard, small and scarce.
Myall.—Dark, hard, heavy, small, with strong perfume of violets.

UPHOLSTERY.

In the upholstering trade there are many branches whose connection with one another is not very apparent to the uninitiated; amongst the more important may be mentioned mattress making, mattress stuffing, coach upholstering, carpet laying, carpet sewing, blind sewing, palliasse sewing, bolster sewing, pillow sewing, cording, loose covering, mosquito-net making, and draping. In these branches there are in the metropolitan district about 200 operatives, and for two-thirds of these the work is constant. The remainder lead a hand to mouth existence, and only obtain work at irregular intervals.

In London an upholstress is supposed to be able to turn her hand to any branch of the work, and in this colony in some establishments the same upholstresses sew mattresses, carpets, and blinds. In most cases, however, the branches are distinct, each having its own special workers, who seldom drift into any other kind of employment.

Apprenticeship.

The proportion of indentured apprentices to journeymen is very small, being only about one to every ten; but, learning the trade without indentures, there are about three boys to every ten competent hands. Starting with wages averaging about 5s. per week, these beginners gradually acquire a little knowledge of several branches of the trade, and finally settle down to that in which they are most efficient. Smart lads properly taught may learn the business in about five years, but a knowledge of woman's work is more quickly acquired, and girls, though never bound by indentures, may become qualified assistants in about two years.

Wages.

There are four grades of workers among the male hands, viz.: Foremen, journeymen, improvers, and apprentices, whose rates of wages and average weekly earnings are set forth in the following table:—

Grade.	Highest.	Lowest.	Average.
Foremen	70/-	60/-	64/6
Journeymen	60/-	30/-	50/3
Improvers	20/-	20/-	20/-
Apprentices	15/-	5/-	10/6

Journeymen are occasionally employed on piecework, their wages ranging from 60s. to 40s., and their earnings averaging about 53s. per week while in full work.

The various classes of female workers, and their average weekly earnings, are as follows:—

	s.	d.		s.	d.		s.	d.
Mattress sewers	18	0	Corders	20	0	Carpet sewers	17	6
Palliasse sewers	20	0	Leather sewers	25	0	Mosquito-net makers...	20	0
Men's hands	17	6	Loose covers	20	0	Drapers	25	0

Though all receiving weekly wages, the time and amount of work done by each hand are measured with great minuteness, and every care is taken to secure from all a certain average amount of work in a given time. Mattress and palliasse makers are expected to make 1 dozen mattress covers, or 6 to 8 palliasse covers, per day; corders, to finish a suite of furniture in two days; carpet sewers, to sew 20 to 30 yards per day; and leather sewers, who are more highly paid on account of the heaviness of their work, to "pipe" a pair of arms in 1½ hours, or to cover a settee in 4 hours, extra time being allowed for joining skins.

Carpet sewers are sometimes paid by the piece at the rate of 2d. per yard, finding thread, or 1½d. per yard if thread is provided. The average quantity of work per hour is from 3 to 4 yards, though some can do 5 to 8 yards without over exertion. In cases of exceptional ability or exceptionally profitable descriptions of work they occasionally make large earnings, but the rates above given fairly represent their average weekly earnings.

A few women are employed as bedding hands at about 40s. per week, and others, whose business is to attend upon the upholsterers and do odds and ends as required, are called "men's hands," and receive about 17s. 6d. per week.

Employment for all hands in these branches is fairly constant, and no good worker should be idle for more than three weeks in the year.

A few years ago, business being but small, and competent hands very scarce, rates of remuneration were consequently high, and few shops could give constant work on weekly wages. The greater part of the upholstering was done by women on piecework, and a quick needlewoman often earned very high wages during the time she was at work. As business increased, and work was more minutely subdivided, girls were engaged on weekly wages, and persons were found to undertake certain portions of upholstering at wages far lower than had previously been paid to fully competent hands.

MATTRESS STUFFING.

The principal materials used in stuffing mattresses, palliasses, bolsters, pillows, chairs, sofas, and cushions are: Horsehair, feathers, Ceylon fibre, cocoanut fibre, hemp, flax, kapok, pulu, stringybark, seaweed, white flock, and black flock. Of these the best and most expensive are horsehair, feathers, the various kinds of fibre, kapok, and pulu. Seaweed is objectionable on account of its tendency to absorb moisture from the air, and become damp and offensive; white flock is the waste product of cotton mills, and is largely used in upholstering the cheaper classes of imported furniture. Black flock, or, as it is called in the trade, "Melbourne wool," is made from the filthy woollen rags collected by ragpickers from street dustbins and refuse heaps. Without undergoing any process of purification or disinfection, these choice pickings are usually taken straight to the flock-mill, where the "teaser" reduces them to fluff, which is then sold to upholsterers who use it largely in the production of cheap furniture. The boys who tend the teasing mills, and the hands who stuff black flock mattresses, generally wear respirators, but the filthy dust of this abominable material frequently nauseates them in spite of that precaution. Although every upholsterer is opposed to black flock, it is nevertheless employed to a much greater extent than all other classes of stuffing material, and its use is undoubtedly a menace to the public health, since the very beds and couches have become the vehicles by which disease may be spread. Pretentious-looking upholstered chairs and couches stuffed with this material have been opened and found swarming with larvæ, and ordinary cheap mattresses not long is use have been found in a like condition. It is apparent, therefore, that the public health is regarded as a matter entirely subordinate to personal profit by the furniture dealers who impose upon the confidence of an unsuspecting people a deception so atrocious. Even if it were cleansed and disinfected it would still be repugnant to most people, and its use would be rendered impossible if people were careful to find out what the covers of their sofas and mattresses conceal.

During

During the last few years the almost complete displacement of the palliasse by the wire or spring mattress has formed a noticeable feature in upholstery. Its lightness, cleanness, and general suitability to the climate of this Colony has brought it very rapidly into public favour, and the proportion of palliasses now sold is scarcely one to a hundred of its new-born rival. The palliasse-maker has drifted into other branches of the trade, and the carpenter and the wire-worker—or, more correctly speaking, wire-working machinery—have taken his place. In one firm where three years ago five palliasse-makers were constantly employed, not one is now engaged, but the rough carpenter is found instead putting together the frames, while a boy guides the wire curling and twisting machine.

French Polishing.

In the Metropolitan district there are about 300 men engaged in the polishing trade, about one third of whom are out of employment for three or four months of the year, during the periods of slackness prevailing in this as in other branches of the furniture industry.

The usual length of a week's work is 48 hours, though in a few shops it is from 2 to 3 hours longer.

The rate of payment for work done by the piece varies with the quality of the work from 3d. to 8d. a foot, but the average weekly earnings at these rates will not differ much, the more highly paid classes of work requiring more time than the inferior classes. The earnings of journeymen on piece-work range from 50s. 6d. up to 60s., and average 52s. a week.

The rates of weekly payment vary considerably, and some of the workers are able to make good wages, though it by no means follows that the best tradesmen receive the highest rates, but rather the contrary, since inferior hands who get through much work are most in demand. The grades of workers and the highest, lowest, and average wages recorded for each, are set forth in the following table:—

Grade.	Weekly Wages.		
	Highest.	Lowest.	Average.
Foremen	72/-	55/-	60/6
Journeymen	60/-	40/-	49/6
Improvers	43/-	12/6	24/-

The French polishing of furniture was formerly done by day work in the shops of the manufacturers, but there is now a growing tendency in favour of sub-letting it to the lowest tenderers, with the natural consequence of encouraging inferior work and extending the hours of labour. Similar bad results follow from the practice of sub-letting contracts for polishing the fittings of buildings, which is usually done by furniture polishers. It is customary in the first instance to sub-let the contract for painting and polishing, and the sub-contractor usually again sub-lets the polishing, naturally at a profit to himself. This sub-contract is carried out on piece-work, and it not infrequently happens that there are three or four persons who, without any risk or trouble, make a profit out of the work of the polisher. In the interest of honest work, and to enable the polisher to reckon on fair wages, this system should be as much as possible discouraged by all connected with the trade.

Although proper instruction is necessary to make a competent workman, yet it is a very easy thing for beginners to learn a little of the polishing trade, and the greater part of the undercutting and sweating induced by the sub-letting of contracts is due to the existence of a large body of half-taught polishers, who will take any job at a very low price and do it badly.

Great skill is displayed by some polishers in producing on wood, such as Huon or kauri pine, imitations of other and more valuable timbers so perfect that it is difficult in some instances to distinguish them from the genuine article.

Apprenticing to the trade is now very rare. Boys begin at 5s. a week and work up, sand-papering the wood, filling in the grain with plaster of Paris, oiling, giving first coat, and so on until qualified to rank as improvers.

Chair-making.

The importation of Austrian chair frames has so seriously affected the business of chair-making that a large proportion of those at one time engaged in the industry have found it impossible to obtain work at their trade. These men naturally turned their attention to cabinet-making, but as the knowledge required in that trade is essentially different from that of the chair-maker, they have found that the change involved considerable hardship.

The working time is generally 8 or 9 hours a day, and a good hand receives 50s. to 60s. a week, and improvers, 22s. to 25s. a week.

Very few men are at present employed solely at chair-making, those who put together imported frames being mostly rough carpenters or packers, whose weekly wages are very little higher than the average of ordinary unskilled labour.

Carving.

The greater portion of their most important and remunerative work, comprises capitals for columns, mouldings, brackets, and other architectural details, so that carvers, although classed as a subdivision of cabinet-makers, might, with equal propriety, be treated as an independent trade. Yet their general condition is so much influenced by the state of the cabinet-making industry that it may not be thought inappropriate to deal with them here.

The trade has for a considerable period suffered from a serious depression, the severity of which has been greatly increased by inconsiderate internal competition. At the present time there remain in Sydney not more than fifty carvers, and even for this small number employment is very irregular, and extends over only about eight months in the year. Almost all work is done by the piece, and 9 hours usually constitute a day's work, the wages ranging from 9d. to 1s. 4d. per hour, according to the state of the trade and the ability of the workman.

There is no union or organisation among the operatives, and in slack times competition is so keen that work is undertaken at very reduced rates.

Turning.

In this branch of the furniture industry competition during the last few years has become very keen between the large joinery mills, where most of the work is done by machinery, driven by steam power, and the smaller shops, where hand power is mostly used. A man who can engage a lathe at one of the mills is enabled to work at a lower rate than the small turner who provides his own motive power, and by using up odd lengths of timber from the mill can make table legs and sell them in sets lower than their price if made of material procured in the ordinary way. As illustrating the great fall in prices, it may be mentioned that less than ten years ago the contract price for the supply of insulators to the Telegraph Department was 45s. per 100; three years later it was 35s. per 100 to the same firm; in the year following another contractor supplied them at 30s. per 100; a year later a third undertook the work at 19s. 6d. per 100, and again at 15s. 6d. per 100; and for the last two years the price has been 14s. 6d., or less than was formerly paid to the turner for making them. These insulators are of Australian hardwood, the pin being 10 inches long with a 2-inch worm, and the turner's wages during the period above mentioned fell from 16s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. per 100.

Apprentices are found in nearly all the mills, and are usually indentured for five years at a progressive wage of 5s. to 20s. a week. The wages of journeymen range from 45s. to 66s., the average earnings of those on weekly wages being 57s., and of piece-workers, 58s. a week, while improvers are paid 30s. to 40s. a week. The hours of labour are usually 48 per week, but as there is no trade organisation, men will, in dull times, work longer hours for lower wages. These slack periods generally last for three or four months every year. Turners generally provide their own tools to the value of about 20s. There are about 100 workers in this trade in the Metropolitan District, to which it is almost exclusively confined.

Cane, Pith, and Wicker Work.

During recent years there has been a great development in the manufacture of furniture from cane, pith, and wicker, and despite the importations from Germany, China, and elsewhere, the local factories at Sydney and Newcastle display considerable activity. The articles made of those materials are specially adapted to this climate and have to some extent superseded the heavier kinds of furniture.

Cane or rattan comes principally from China, Java, Singapore, and Calcutta, and costs from 6d. to 1s. per lb. For common basket ware the ruling price is from £16 to £20 per ton.

The outside or skin of cane is chiefly used for seating chairs, &c., while the pith or inside is twisted into basket work chairs of various kinds.

For wicker work the material used is mostly the ozier willow grown in Tasmania, and worth about £30 per ton.

It is estimated that there are about seventy men and thirty boys employed in the trade in Sydney and Newcastle. Some apprentices are bound for three years, others for four or five years, at wages rising from 5s. to 20s. per week.

Formerly there was a Cane and Wicker Workers' Union, but finding itself powerless to control the trade, or even its own members, the organisation speedily came to an end. During its existence the Union endeavoured to establish the principle that an employer should engage not more than one apprentice to every three men. An effort was also made to enforce a fixed price for piece-work, and a uniform rate of 1s. per hour for all articles not on the list.

The present rate of wages varies from 40s. to 70s. a week, and the earnings of a skilful worker will average 60s. a week for nine months in the year.

The hours of labour are not everywhere the same, but a week's work averages about fifty hours.

A few females in their own homes engage in the manufacture of cane chairs and basket work, and earn on an average from 15s. to 20s. per week.

The local manufacture finds formidable rivals in the German made fancy basket ware and the lounges, chairs, blinds, &c., imported from China and other countries in rapidly increasing quantities. It is said that some firms send samples of locally made wares to China with orders for goods of a similar description, and local manufacturers complain that their business is greatly injured by the practice.

Picture-frame Makers.

This industry has never attained a position of importance and is now reduced to a very low ebb. The materials used for frames of pictures are imported for the most part from Germany. Some oak and hardwood mouldings are made in Sydney, but the quantity is too small to provide continuous employment for more than a few hands. The principal occupation of those employed in this trade consists in making frames to order from imported materials. The hands are recruited mainly from the ranks of the carpenters and joiners.

Including gilders, who are in some sense associated with the frame makers, there are about sixty men employed in this business, but the work available is not sufficient to keep this number in full work for more than nine months in the year.

The hands are engaged almost without exception by the week and the rates of wages are, for first class gilders 60s. per week, for others doing gilders work 40s. to 50s. per week. Frame makers and glass cutters work eight to nine hours, and are paid 7s. to 8s. per day.

There is no organisation in the trade, and the conditions of labour differ greatly in the different shops, and although both hours of labour and rates of wages are quoted, these must not be interpreted too strictly, as the trade is in an altogether unsatisfactory state, and men are willing to work longer hours, if necessary, to keep their employment.

Venetian Blind Making.

The materials most commonly used in the manufacture of Venetian blinds are redwood and clear pine, which are imported from the United States. In the busy season it is estimated that, including boys and apprentices, about 100 persons find employment in this trade. During about three or four months, however, business is dull, and a large proportion of the workers are compelled to seek employment in other trades, such as upholstery and joinery, while, as might be expected, a good many persons belonging

belonging to these trades take up Venetian blind making during the busy season. A large number of females were formerly employed sewing loops on the webbing, but these are now woven in by the web manufacturers, so that few females are at present employed.

The usual length of a day's work is nine hours, and the average wages are, for journeymen, 45s. per week, and for boys from 10s. to 18s. per week.

Mat Making.

With the exception of one private establishment, where ten hands are employed at wages ranging from 16s. to 30s. per week, mat making in Sydney is carried on only in Darlinghurst Gaol and the Industrial Blind Institution.

The material used in the manufacture is coir, or coir yarn, from India, and the mats usually have some device, or pattern, or a name of the house, firm, or person, woven into the texture. Mats imported from Calcutta are usually plain and are sold at prices from 30 per cent. to 40 per cent. lower than the locally-made article, much of which is made to order and to measure. The prices are, for imported mats, 6d. per lb., for the locally-made, 8d. to 9d. per lb., for mats of equal quality.

At the Industrial Blind Institution there are fifteen persons engaged in mat making who are paid by results, and earn from 15s. to 20s. a week.

APPENDIX.

Chinese in the Furniture Trades.

Furniture making is the only manufacturing industry in which Chinese have exercised an influence prejudicial to Australian workmen. Their opposition, however, is now much less powerful than it was three years ago, and under the operation of the Chinese Restriction Act it will presently disappear.

Conditions.

It is popularly supposed that Chinese live on food of a cheap and inferior character, but this belief is entirely erroneous. The cabinet-makers have regularly three meals a day, of which salt-fish, rice, pork, cabbage, and the cheaper kinds of tea, constitute the principal items. On Sundays these are generally supplemented by poultry of some kind and gin.

The workmen invariably live on the premises where they work, and the most objectionable characteristic of the sleeping accommodation is the entire neglect of the most ordinary sanitary requirements in regard to cubic space. The dimensions of a number of rooms have been taken, and it is found that 500 cubic feet is the average space allotted to each sleeper. In many cases, however, the space is much less than this average, 300 cubic feet to each person being all that is available in some of the rooms examined. The buildings are mostly of the ramshackle order, and on that account the ventilation as a rule is sufficient, but the stench is tolerable only to Chinese nostrils. The sanitary condition of their workshops is for the most part poor in the extreme, but it must be said in their favour that the workers invariably bathe at the close of each day's labour.

As a rule their habits are simple, their wants few, and their expenses small. They never fail to send home regular remittances for the support of their wives and children, or other relatives. Their amusements are necessarily few, for owing to their lengthy hours of labour they have very little time to spend away from their lodgings. Few masters will employ opium-smokers, even on piece-work, for they are usually indolent and unsatisfactory workers. They also object to men who gamble, as they well know from experience, that when the love of gambling seizes a man he ceases to be a good workman. Gambling is very prevalent, but it is carried on almost entirely in the dens so plentiful in Sydney. Domino playing is one of their principal sources of amusement and certain games of cards are also very popular amongst them.

Employers describe their men as peaceful, sober, methodical, honest, learning quickly, imitating cleverly, and protecting to the best of their ability the interest and property of their employers. Masters and men are on familiar terms and talk together with the greatest freedom.

The hours of labour are from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. in summer, ceasing at an earlier hour in winter. Half-an-hour is allowed for breakfast and the same for dinner, the men losing no time in going backwards and forwards by taking their meals on the premises. Much longer hours than those above stated are sometimes worked when required, but men on weekly wages receive no pay for overtime, and piece-workers receive no advance on the price for work done in ordinary time.

In every shop a schedule of prices paid to piece-workers is hung up in a prominent place for the information of applicants for employment.

Wages.

Men who were satisfied with 15s. or 20s. a week before the Restriction Act was passed have since become more independent in consequence of the limitation of their numbers, and now demand and receive a regular wage of 25s. to 30s. with board and lodging. Good cabinet-makers can earn 32s. to 35s, and even more, with board and lodging, which is equivalent to an additional 9s. per week.

Some twelve months since a strike amongst the Chinese cabinet-makers resulted in an increase in the piece-work price of several articles, equivalent to a general advance of 10 per cent. Another outcome of the strike was that a considerable number of employees set up on their own account. In most cases they associated themselves in companies of three or four, and no machinery being required a capital of £8 or £10 each sufficed to start them in business. In April and May last year further agitations produced a slight additional increase in the rates paid.

It

It was a common practice, but not now so general as in former days, for workmen to draw only sufficient of their earnings to defray current expenses, leaving the balance to accumulate in the hands of their employers, to be paid without interest at their final separation. The item of lodging is thought so unimportant as not to be worth taking into consideration in the matter of payment, but 9s. or 10s. a week is deducted from the earnings of each piece-worker to pay for his food, the supply of which is estimated to cost employers 9s. a week for each man. The workmen find their own tools and usually work in their national costume without covering to their feet, and their expenditure on clothing does not exceed an average of £5 per head per annum. Allowing for tobacco, and occasional indulgences at festivals, men who do not gamble are able to save a fair sum during the year. As already explained, a certain amount is annually transmitted to their relatives in China, as the filial piety inculcated by their religion requires of them, but in spite of this the steady workman continues to lay by something in expectation of the day when enough has been saved to enable him to live at ease in his own "flowery land," whither he loses no time in returning.

The Chinese carpenters are exceedingly economical workmen. Timber that would be rejected as unfit for use by the ordinary Australian is utilised in some way or other, so that nothing comes amiss and there is absolutely no waste in his work. The timber they buy is usually selected in lengths an Australian tradesman would consider too troublesome to work. Old packing cases are used up for backs of meat-safes and similar articles, and parts not seen, such as bottoms and backs of drawers, are seldom even roughly planed. Their small economies of various kinds do more to make their competition against the Australian tradesman effective than their long hours and lower wages.

Where the business is extensive, in order to allow a departure from the standard thicknesses of the saw-mills and to effect certain economies of material, the timber is generally sawn upon the premises. The sawyers are rarely Chinese, who do not appear to possess strength for the work, or perhaps think their energies better employed in other directions. Only one firm has yet procured any machinery worth noticing, and it is surprising to see how much they contrive to do without it. Their manual skill is considerable, and the dexterity with which they hold and guide the material and keep it in position with their toes, renders each foot almost equivalent to another hand.

The profits of Chinese cabinet-making are not so great as formerly, owing partly to the advance in wages brought about by the strike above mentioned, and partly to the competition of the small co-operative establishments alluded to, which are the chief supporters of the furniture auction sales. Another source of trouble is the determination of a large local firm to undersell them in their own special lines. By the aid of complete machinery it is likely the firm in question will succeed in their purpose, especially if the upward tendency of the wages of Chinese workmen is maintained. Taking all things into consideration it is evident that the lot of the Chinese cabinet-maker is not so prosperous as once it was.

Settlement of Disputes.

With regard to the method of settling differences between masters and men a great deal may be learnt from the Chinese. When a matter involving a conflict of opinion arises the question is first argued at length by the master and his workmen. Should no satisfactory arrangement be arrived at, a deputation of workmen waits upon the master, and the facts are again discussed. If the dispute is not then settled, the party aggrieved has the option of calling together what is known as a "Ki Fong," that is, he issues invitations to some of the principal Chinese in business in the city, who meet at an appointed place, hear the parties, and after weighing the arguments, at once settle the matter by a vote of the majority. Their verdict is in all cases final, and is seldom if ever appealed against or disregarded.

The "Ki Fong" has frequently been the means of preventing very expensive law proceedings and prolonged conflicts between employers and employed. In selecting its members preference is always given to the most highly educated and intelligent men, who rarely refuse to adjudicate when called upon, as it is regarded as an honor to be so selected. It is worthy of note that no witnesses are called, the verdict being based upon the statements of the contending parties alone.

There are at present in Sydney eight or more different groups or tribes of Chinese, each composed of men from the same district in the land of their birth. Before sailing from Hongkong each man receives a list of the principal houses of business belonging to people of his own tribe in the city of his destination, to some of whom he makes himself known immediately on his arrival. The members of each tribe use their best endeavours to promote the welfare of their fellow tribesmen, and the preference given to them in all matters of business is very noticeable, especially in some establishments where members of a particular tribe are employed to the exclusion of all others.

The general condition of Chinese life in the Colony has been discussed at some length, as it bears directly upon the question of competition between Chinese and Australian tradesmen. It will be seen that there is not such a wide difference as is generally supposed between the wages of the two nationalities, and the food consumed by the Mongolian is, in point of quality and value, not much below that enjoyed by the Australian. The working day of the former is some two and a half hours longer, but the latter has a compensating advantage in the greater use of machinery and the better quality of work done. The points where the Chinese gain most advantage are—economy of material and contentment with inferior conditions. The first, it will be acknowledged, is a virtue, or something very like one; the second is emphatically a matter calling for the intervention of the sanitary authorities. The wretched sleeping accommodation already referred to, as well as the common lodging-houses in this city, whether occupied by Chinese or by Australians, are a source of danger, not to their inmates only, but to the entire community, and demand some sweeping reform.

Were the Chinese operatives compelled by law to observe proper sanitary precautions, and had they the same standard of comfort in their dwellings as Australian workers generally insist upon, the competition between the two races would be purged of some of its evils, and placed on the same footing as in other branches of industrial enterprise.

Present prices paid by Chinese furniture houses for work done by the piece.

	Each.	Average time taken.		Each.	Average time taken.
Cedar wardrobe, 3-drawers, pine or cedar	30/-	4 days.	3-ft. toilets, pine or cedar, marble and tile, per pair	17/-	2½ days.
Do 1-drawer, do ...	27/-	3½ „	Common cedar safes	5/-	1 day.
Round corner book-case, do ...	30/-	4½ „	Do size a little larger...	5/6	1 „
Square do do do ...	25/-	3½ „	Common pine safes	3/-	2 per day.
Round corner, 7-drawers, chest of drawers	20/-	3 „	Dining tables, 6 ft. x 4 ft.	5/6	1 „
Square do 7 do do ...	14/-	2 „	Do 7 ft. x 4 ft.	7/-	1 „
Largest size wardrobe, two sides, glass centre	80/-	14 „	Do 4 ft. x 3 ft.	2/6	2 „
8-drawer chest drawers, pine or cedar ...	25/-	4½ „	Kitchen tables, 2 x 4	2/6	3 „
9 do do do ...	25/-	4½ „	Dresser and table combined	14/-	2 days.
5-ft. cedar sideboard	30/-	5 „	3-ft. washstands	3/6	2 per day.
4-ft. do	25/-	3 „	2-ft. 6-in. washstands	2/6	3 „
3-ft. do	18/-	2½ „	Very common do	2/-	3 „
Chiffonier, ordinary size	10/-	1½ „	Writing desks or table (covered)	30/-	5 days.
4-ft. toilets, pine or cedar, marble and tile, per pair	25/-	4 „	4-drawer chest	8/6	1½ „
3-ft. 6-in. toilets, pine or cedar, marble and tile, per pair	20/-	3 „	Dinner waggons	16/-	2½ „

NOTE.—The above articles are those made mostly by the piece-work men, and are simply made up in their rough state, that is, put together ready for the sandpaper man and the polisher to turn out. The timber is cut and got ready by the man in charge of the sawing department, and the quantities as required are handed over to the workman.

Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer.—1892.

[1s.]